



1985 FIVE DOLLARS



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# Public Perceptions of Recent Projects

*A Berkeley class conducts evaluations of five buildings and spaces. By Kathryn H. Anthony*

San Franciscans are unusually conscious of their physical environment, some say to the point of chauvinism. So in the city's recent surge of downtown growth each new development has been carefully scrutinized and often rigorously debated, especially in the local press and the architectural community.

What has been missing is any systematic effort to determine what the everyday person on the street thinks of these new buildings and spaces. Do those who use and visit them feel that their impact on the city has been positive or negative?

During two recent summers, I asked my students at the University of California at Berkeley to find some answers. They were enrolled in my course, "Social and Cultural Factors in Architectural and Urban Design." Their task was to select one site from a list of major new San Francisco design projects; to review the available literature about the site, including professional architectural criticism; to interview the project architect if possible; to observe user behavior for at least 10 hours in and around the site; and to interview a minimum of 50 users about their opinions of the project. Some went well beyond the minimum, observing 30 hours of behavior and surveying over 100 users. Some students also interviewed staff and management. My teaching assistants and I carefully monitored all phases of the research. The following are some of the things that we learned:

**Levi Strauss Plaza** by Lawrence Halprin is the anchor of the new world headquarters of the garmentmaker Levi Strauss. The plaza sits next to a set of low, terraced

red brick buildings by Hellmuth, Obata & Kassabaum. Over half of the 11-acre site was given over to open space, adjoined in places by shops, restaurants, and other facilities.

Almost everyone we interviewed was highly satisfied with Levi's Plaza. Among their reasons: "It has a kind of friendly atmosphere, different from the hustle and bustle of the nearby Financial District." "It provides conveniences for people compared to the conditions about 10 years ago, when junky buildings occupied this land. The plaza has changed the environment drastically into a beautiful and secure place."

Most users came from nearby offices, three blocks away or closer. Only a small percentage of users were from the Levi Strauss complex itself. Most visit the plaza to have lunch, soak up some sunshine (at a premium in downtown San Francisco), to read, and to watch people. The majority of people surveyed visited the plaza several times a week.

A major design decision at Levi's Plaza was to separate the open space into two distinct areas—a "hard" and a "soft" plaza, each with a major fountain. Through the fountains, the stream, and the lush greenery of the soft plaza, the designer intended to create "a Sierra setting in the heart of the city." Most people preferred the east ("soft") to the west ("hard") plaza, citing the contoured landscape and the trees as their favorite features. They praised the fountains at each site. While using the plaza, most people felt relaxed, happy, and unrestricted. They seemed to appreciate the designer's desire to add a touch of rusticity to the urban fabric.

*Across page: top, the 'soft' space at Levi's; bottom, the 'hard' court. Below, Levi's against Telegraph Hill. Above, a glimpse of Neiman-Marcus from Union Square.*



**Neiman-Marcus** department store faces a corner of the stately center of San Francisco's thriving shopping district, Union Square. This controversial building features a rotunda and neoclassical stained glass dome preserved from the original City of Paris department store built in 1908.

Our study indicated that people have a negative opinion of the building and that it is neither perceived nor used in the way the architect intended. Most of those interviewed felt that the building did not fit into Union Square as a whole, primarily because it was too different from its neighbors. "It's too flat and cardboardy," said one respondent. Another commented, "It's too trendy. Like current fashion, it's trying to be 'new wave.'" Most people disliked the building facade. As one put it, "I hate the checkerboard. Why can't they make a building pretty anymore?"

No one was able to understand what architect Philip Johnson, FAIA, was trying to achieve in his design. Apparently one of the architect's intentions, through his box-like shape and geometric-patterned cladding of two shades of pink granite tile, was to simulate a gift box from Neiman-Marcus to the city of San Francisco. None of our respondents caught the image. Instead, they compared it to "a pair of argyle socks," or "a clown's costume." Everyone enjoyed the old rotunda, but most felt it had been poorly integrated into the design. "It looks like a grand compromise," said one user. "Seems like tokenism," said another.

**Dr. Anthony** is assistant professor of architecture and of housing research and development at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She thanks the 28 students who worked on the project.







Others complained, "The building should have been designed with the rotunda in mind, rather than simply attaching a building to it"; "the rotunda looks like a caged animal." We also found that people rarely stopped to look at display windows, probably because they are very dark. Three small display windows at eye level were viewed most often, but usually by people who had just left the store.

While most people praised the architect for locating the main entryway on the diagonal facing Union Square, they found that the front doors were too heavy and difficult to operate, necessitating the hiring of a doorman. The narrow front entrance created additional difficulties. As one woman commented, "There are too many small doors and they all open out onto the sidewalk, so it seems crowded



*Top, the corner of Neiman-Marcus with caged rotunda from its predecessor building. Above, openings in side walls.*

Street were rarely used. Their doors are cut into the facade and angled in such a way that they are hard to see from the street, especially when walking to the east, away from Union Square.

**Justin Herman Plaza** is at the foot of Market Street across from the multi-building, mixed use Embarcadero Center. Originally designed by Lawrence Halprin & Associates, John S. Bolles & Associates, and Mario J. Ciampi, FAIA, the plaza opened in 1971. The 4.2 acres of open space include a lawn area, brick-paved plaza, a five-sided irregularly shaped pool, and sculptor Armand Vaillancourt's monumental free-form fountain that recycles 30,000 gallons of water a minute. The

director of the San Francisco Redevelopment Agency in the early 1960s, one of the first to envision the Embarcadero Center.

In 1982, John Portman & Associates, architects of Embarcadero Center, created some major changes in the plaza. An outdoor theater, landscaping, and a generous number of tables and chairs were added, creating a European-style open space like no other in the city. Architect William Turnbull, FAIA, was inspired by images of 19th century bandstands when designing the Plaza Theater pavillion, a simple latticed cornice resting on sonotube columns. A glass skylight sits atop the cornice. Local and traveling groups perform here seven days a week.

In addition to the standard techniques, we also examined Justin Herman Plaza using the criteria developed by William Whyte in his immensely valuable book and film, "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces." Our observations showed that overall, a slight majority of plaza users are women. On weekends, women outnumber men two to one. According to Whyte, heavy use by women often results from successful open space design.

In terms of Whyte's criteria for socially successful urban spaces, Justin Herman Plaza ranks very high, with much access to sun, fair degree of protection from wind (buildings block the westerly ocean breezes), access to water, and trees. The plaza offers many opportunities for "tri-angulation" (a term Whyte coined to denote a stimulus that gives two people something to talk about)—with the unusual Vaillancourt fountain, entertainers on stage, and street vendors. One of the most successful aspects of the plaza is its proximity to food, as numerous small restaurants and eateries line its edge and provide a wide variety of tastes and prices.

Seating is also abundant. Most people prefer to sit at the tables and chairs, and their second choice is on the steps. The fixed seating arrangements, while adequate for parties of four or fewer, caused problems for larger groups who were unable to sit together. Furthermore, the vast majority of people came alone or with only one other person. As a result, it was common to see virtually every table taken while many chairs remained unoccupied. Unlike our British counterparts, very few Americans are willing to ask to join strangers. Visitors claimed their territory, and others hesitated to intrude, causing the place to feel more crowded than it really was. Movable chairs, as Whyte suggests, would be even better.

Overall, however, the space was an enormous social success, and the recent incorporation of new design elements, like the outdoor stage, drew throngs of people. In fact, about a third of those surveyed









straight toward the fountain. We saw many children climbing up and around the fountain.



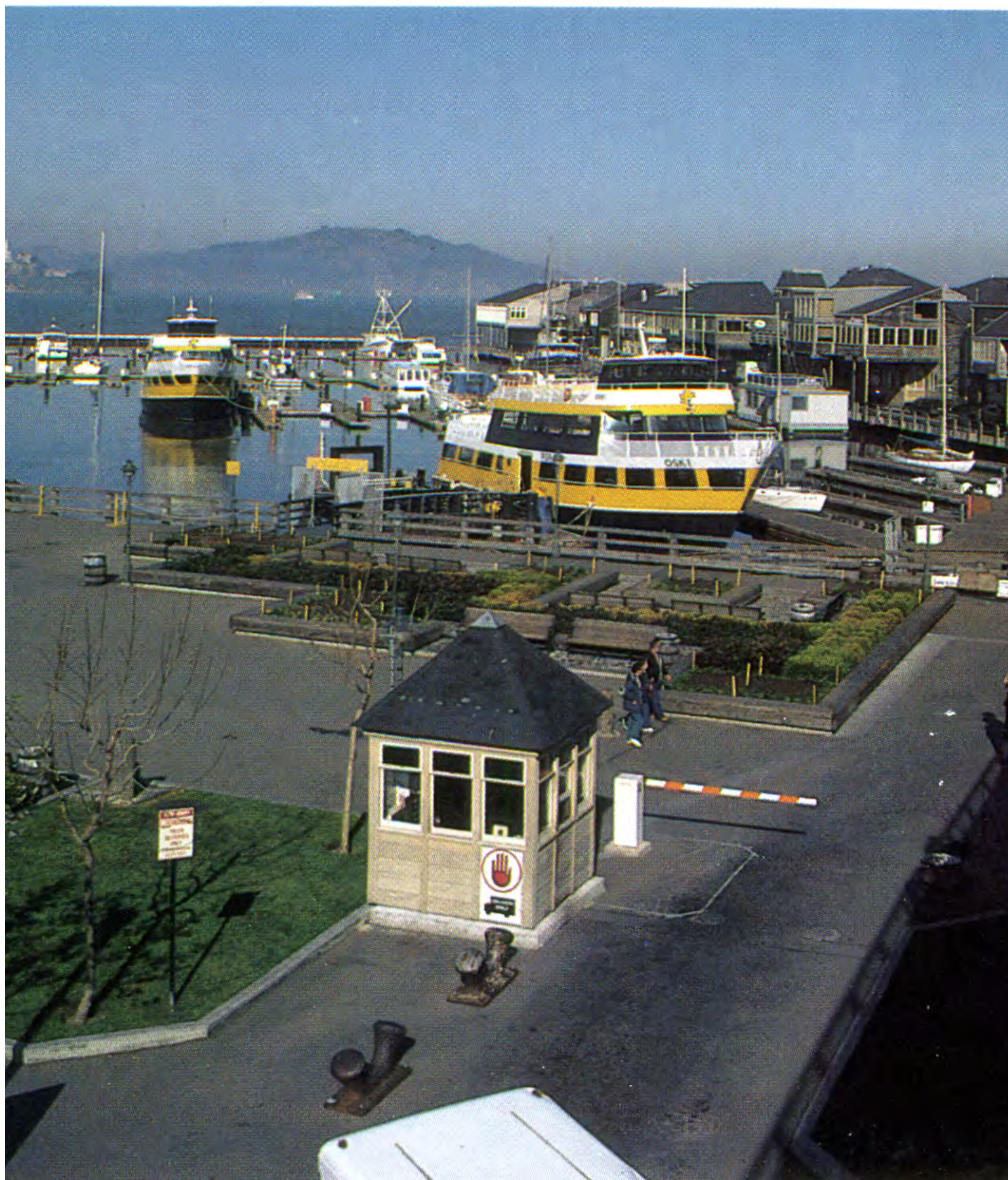




age, clockwise: 101 California's cylindrical, serrated tower; the atrium lobby; the lobby from outside with its plaza and slender surrounding columns.























**The Galleria at Crocker Center** by Skidmore, Owings & Merrill's San Francisco office has become a major retail hub linking the city's shopping and financial districts. The center houses over 60 shops, services, and restaurants, most in the voluminous, vaulted Galleria that runs the width of a block behind the 38-story tower that is home of Crocker National Bank's Northern California headquarters. The Galleria is linked to the tower at several levels and opens onto a roof garden.

Our research at the Galleria revealed that overall its design was extremely successful. It was highly used, and people were very satisfied with it. Over a quarter of those interviewed visit the Galleria every day. Most come to shop, browse, or eat lunch. However, portions of it, especially the roof terrace, were hard to find and virtually void of humanity during most of the day. In fact, over half our respondents were not even aware that the roof garden existed.

Although the Galleria is marketed as having a uniquely European character, influenced by the famous Galleria Vittorio Emanuele in Milan, most of those interviewed did not believe it had a European feel. Most shop owners and managers surveyed were pleased with the Galleria's design but wanted to see an improved directory system, more eateries.

**Louise M. Davies Symphony Hall** by SOM faced the challenge of complementing the existing neoclassical buildings of the San Francisco Civic Center—especially the 1932 Opera House and in Arthur Brown's much-admired 1916 City Hall. So our focus was on the building's success in accommodating to this demanding context.

Our study found that almost all passersby like the building. Two-thirds felt it fit well into its surroundings, mainly because of its color, size, and shape. "It's not a sore thumb," said one person. "It's not the same style, but it doesn't stand out," said another.

Yet another remarked, "Considering the age of the surrounding buildings, Davies seems to harmonize rather well." They were most highly impressed by the generous amounts of glass on the building facade. As one respondent put it, "The lighting at night and the glass allow you to see so much."

When asked what they liked least, the common answer was the projecting exterior balconies on the third level, although these were mentioned by only a few. Among the more bizarre images evoked by the balconies were "Mickey Mouse ears," "flying saucer fins," and "large protrusions—like corns on a toe." It also seemed that respondents over age 40 are more favorable about the building than their younger counterparts. The building has a strong identity. When we asked passersby a few blocks away for directions to the building, almost all knew where it was. Two-thirds of them used their hands to describe the building's curving form.

How do professional architectural critics compare with the public in reacting to these projects? In some cases they concur, in others they differ. For instance, critics scoffed at Pier 39, describing it with disdain. San Francisco *Chronicle's* architecture critic, Allan Temko, called it "corn, kitch, schlock, honky-tonk, dreck, schmaltz, merde . . . pseudo-Victorian junk, childish exorcism . . . San Francisco Port's architectural disaster." And

*Above left, the Crocker Galleria is flanked by a small roof garden (Crocker tower is at top left in photo). Above, the soaring, vaulted space of the Galleria. Across page, clockwise, one of Davies Hall's 'ears'; the hall behind the old Opera House; the hall's curved corner facade.*

yet most people interviewed seemed quite enamored with it.

While Temko's overall review of the new Levi Strauss complex was positive, his opinion of the open space was mixed. He criticized the main fountain in the west plaza, citing the use of "such idiosyncrasies as deliberately imperfect pieces of granite that look like quarryman's errors." He also spoke derogatorily of "paving circular rosette medallions that seem to have been traced from a Hallmark greeting card." No one in our study even noticed these details.

Have these contributions to San Francisco architecture been for the better or for the worse? It seems that from the public's viewpoint, for the most part, they have been positive. They have offered people some amenities—access to the waterfront, open space, and sunlight in an increasingly crowded downtown, an opportunity to live and work and be entertained virtually within the same block—which were otherwise missing. They have broadened the tax base of the city and employed more residents than before. They have helped attract residents and workers to stay in the city, even after hours and on weekends.

In a general sense, these projects have increased the appeal of city living, something that planners and architects across the U.S. have long been trying to encourage, with irregular success. □